Meet Me in the Toilets

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Introduction: Intention, Method, and Context

"Does anyone have a piece of gum? My mouth tastes fuzzy." Immediately, a girl standing in the queue for the toilets in the Students' Union offers a pack of mint gum to the inquiring girl standing near the sinks. These girls do not know each other; they have probably never spoken before. However, they are part of the community that forms in Students' Union's women's bathrooms. Women's toilets are everyday, common spaces, prompting questions about how people use the space and why people are there. Answers to these questions appear to be self-evident; not much other than what one would typically expect occurs in the toilets, and they are generally considered to be private spaces. Toilets are spaces that could be considered "non-places", or places that you pass through solely for their utilitarian purposes. However, in this paper I will argue that the women's toilets in the Students' Union hold much more social significance than might be evident when considering purely practical reasons. I will answer the question: How does a bathroom, particularly the women's bathroom in the Students' Union, become a social space, rather than a space in the design of Mark Augé's "non-places"?

My research took place in the particular context of the women's toilets in the Students' Union on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights. My methods for conducting this analysis include covert anthropology, participant observation, and informal interviews away from the field. The most effective form of covert anthropology when conducting my research was the "go-along" method; interrupting conversations with questions and interviews would have disrupted and manipulated my data. By utilising this method, anthropologists "seek to establish a coherent set of data by spending a particular yet comparable slice of ordinary time with all of their subjects—thus winning in breadth and variety of their collected materials what might get lost in density and intensity" (Kusenbach 2003: 463). I "went along" by standing in the queue for the toilets, participating in conversations, and entering the toilet stall when it was my turn; I did not break routine, or make an exception for myself or others because I was conducting ethnographic research. I acted as though my presence in the toilets was happenstance. I conducted my field research during two consecutive weeks on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights. Each night I spent about two hours in the toilets, but not all at once; I would join the queue, enter the stalls, and linger near the sinks for as long as I felt appropriate. Additionally, I interviewed five girls regarding the women's toilets in the Students' Union, all of whom were students. I found that by combining participant observation, belated, informal interviews, and the "go-along" method, I had a comprehensive set of data and a fuller picture of the bathroom social relations.

In the forthcoming essay, I use the words "toilets" and "bathroom" interchangeably. The particular toilets I refer to in this paper are the women's toilets of the Students' Union at the University of St Andrews, specifically those on the ground floor, to the left of the main entrance. These toilets are located next to the male toilets in the Students' Union; the exterior door of each set of toilets is labelled with an outline figure of either a man or a woman. The women's toilets consist of eight stalls, four on either side of the central corridor, and an equivalent number of sinks with expansive mirrors above them. The queue

for the toilets begins near these sinks and usually flows out of the doors on busy nights. Although this is a large space, some interaction with other people would typically be required as you trade places from the queue to the toilet stalls. This is one of the most populated areas of the Students' Union. It is located at the central junction of the Students' Union, where people entering the Main Bar, moving up and down the stairs and arriving at or leaving the Union intersect. It is the most frequented set of toilets in the Students' Union, making it the ideal site for disproving the notion of toilets as "non-places". At any time during night's out, in the women's bathroom there will be girls examining their makeup in the mirrors, groups of friends socialising, or girls taking pictures to commemorate the night. Additionally, the girls who use these toilets share a sense of identity as students of the University of St Andrews; this allows the interactions in the toilets to occur between girls with common experiences.

What is a "Non-Place"?

A traditionally anthropological "place", like a monument, village, or religious site, is a place of identity; these places can create and foster both group and individual identities. These are places of social relations and history; they represent a continuity between the past and the present. There is also a sense of tradition and ritual in these places (Augé 2008: 43). On the contrary, "[if] a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (*ibid.*: 43). According to Augé, "non-places" can include supermarkets, airport terminals, industrial zones, motorways, train stations, and subway systems; they are sites of utility and mobility. "Non-places" are formed in relation to certain objectives, and the relations individuals have with these places are solitary and anonymous. They are constructed by the act of "passing through"; you do not go to these "non-places" with the intention of having valuable experiences or with a meaningful purpose, but for functional reasons. Augé has argued that individuals are visitors to these places; they form no social relationships. This is owed to "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (*ibid.*: 63).

Toilets may be considered "non-places" because they are not usually regarded as places where social relations can be formed. Most people would go to the toilets to relieve themselves and simply pass through the "non-place" without taking notice of their surroundings. Visiting the toilets is often a solitary experience, and you remain anonymous throughout the journey. You do not usually linger in the toilets for a moment longer than you have to; a quick visit to the toilets is usually the ideal. Since toilets are often considered sites of mobility and utility, they are, therefore, "non-places". However, these observations regarding toilets are not infallibly true. In the Students' Union toilets on lively nights, girls visit the toilets with various goals, and tend to form relationships, causing them to linger in the toilets for longer than necessary. These occurrences cause the women's toilets in the Students' Union to be an exception to the conceptualisation of toilets as "non-places".

"The distinction between places and non-places derives from the opposition between place and space" (Augé 2008: 64). Michel de Certeau distinguishes "space" as a "frequented place" which is created by people in a social environment. Within a "space" there is a connection of doing and seeing; there are rules, norms, and guidelines that are followed, even if they are unspoken. To become a social space, a "place has to come to life… we include in the notion of

anthropological place the possibility of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterising it" (Augé 2008: 64). There are rules and norms within spaces: Who can speak in the space? How do individuals organise themselves temporarily and spatially? How do people move? Are there rules that are understood without being said, because of the nature of the space? How is one space used for different activities? How do people refer to the space? How do they describe their movements in or to the space? (Levinson 1996: 355). "The social production of space includes all those factors—social, economic, ideological, and technical—the intended goal of which is the physical creation of the material setting" (Low 1996: 861); spaces are constructed as much by the society within them as the physical, material manifestation of them. Rather than become "non-places", the Students' Union toilets are frequented, social spaces.

I argue that the women's bathroom in the Students' Union during night's out becomes a social space because it meets all of the qualifications of an anthropological place: purpose, history, kinship, identity, and "rules" or norms; this transforms the bathroom from a 'non-place' into a social place.

Toilets as Sites of Purpose, History, and Kinship

The women's toilets have many functions in the lives of female students of the University of St Andrews, probably the least among them its intended function as a place to relieve oneself. That aspect of utilising the space of the toilets is usually private. However, I observed that most of the other functions of the toilet compose more public moments.

First and foremost, toilets are meeting places. On the nights I conducted ethnography in the Students' Union, I observed many girls say to their friends, "Meet me in the toilets." One interviewee disclosed, "You go to the toilets to talk to your friends—it's a more private place than the Main Bar or somewhere." How does a public space, such as communal toilets, become a site of safety and privacy? This is a space that has random people flowing in and out of its doors, yet it somehow feels intimate and protected. This is because most of the girls are there for the same purpose; there are very few unexpected occurrences in the toilets, which fosters a sense of security. Additionally, the toilets are sites of non-judgement; girls tend to support other girls in the toilets, not criticise them. Girls tell their friends stories of what happened to them throughout the night while waiting in the queue, fixing their makeup or standing by the sinks. I observed one girl revealing to her friends, "I blacked out in the stairwell of Forgan's after ABH ball." This story discloses intimate details about this girl's life; it is a private story which she entrusted to her friends, yet she revealed it in a public space. This further emphasises the supportive atmosphere apparent within the toilets.

Additionally, toilets foster relationships and become sites of kinship. For the purposes of this essay, I define kinship as relationships "established through affinity" (Jary & Jary 2006), or friendships. While some girls meet up with their friends in the toilets, others form spontaneous friendships. I observed the toilets as being a compassionate place; girls help other girls. In one circumstance, I noticed a group of friends taking pictures in the mirror; they posed and pointed the camera towards the glass of the mirror, struggling to achieve one photograph without the flash or the glare of the lights interfering with the image. Seeing that they were struggling, a girl standing near the sinks offered to take a picture for them. The group of friends readily accepted and

posed for the other girl, who proceeded to take numerous pictures for the group. Then, one of the members of the group of friends reciprocated the favour, taking a picture of the girl and one of her friends. These photographs aid in the transformation of the space from private to public; the experiences in the toilets are immortalised on social media and shared with people who were not first-hand witnesses of the events. This public aspect of the space helps to define the toilets as a social space, rather than as a "non-place."

On another occasion, a girl who was in a stall called out, asking someone to pass her a handful of toilet paper, as her stall had run out. Immediately, another girl went into an unoccupied stall and retrieved some, then passed the paper through the marginally opened stall door to the girl in need. Similarly, in another instance, from within a cluster of girls at the sinks and mirrors, a girl asked the room at large, "Does anyone have an extra hair tie? Mine just snapped." She was then bombarded with offers of little, black hair ties, one of which she graciously accepted. In the toilets, there is a common kinship. Girls help other girls, because they know similar help would be offered to them. If you have a hair tie to give, you give it, because you hope someone would do the same for you. Girls also offer more serious help to those in need. I once observed a girl enter a toilet stall and subsequently become sick. A girl who was nearby with her friend, waiting near the sinks, went over to her, and held her hair back, while her friend retrieved a damp paper towel, in order to help her. These girls did not appear to know each other; they had no prior relationship or obligation. Yet the empathetic space of the toilets made them feel inclined to help an unwell girl.

These meetings and relationships create a history; they create stories that can be told and remembered. I define history as "the recorded past" (Jary & Jary 2006); the history within toilets is a predominantly oral history. One interviewee, who I will refer to as Jane, related a story to me of her experience with relationships in the bathroom. Jane, a member of the dance team at the University of St Andrews, went to the "Sinners" event on a Wednesday night and went to the toilets at some point during the night. There, she was standing in the queue, and while waiting, she turned to the girl in front of her and inquired, "What sports team are you on?", as most people at the Students' Union on the nights of "Sinners" are members of sports teams. Jane and the girl began to speak enthusiastically about a mutual friend from dance, about the modules they were taking, and about their plans for the rest of the night. When the girl reached the front of the queue and went to find a toilet stall, she beckoned Jane to follow. The two of them continued their conversation in the stall and became friends on Facebook. Now, whenever they pass each other, whether it be on Market Street or in the Students' Union, the two girls acknowledge each other. They created a history in the toilets of the Students' Union by forging a relationship through a happenstance meeting. The interactions in toilets are not necessarily permanent or even long-lasting, but they are remembered; they become stories that are told and retold. The stories become a part of a history that share the same social space: the women's toilets in the Students' Union.

Toilets as Identity Sites with Norms and Rules

With the combination of purpose, history and kinship, the toilets in the Students' Union become not only a social space, but also a community; this community is governed by norms and rules. Norms influence "behaviour in a social setting… social life, as an ordered and continuous process, is dependent upon shared expectations and

obligations" (Jary & Jary 2006). The norms of space often communicate hierarchical relations (Keating 1999: 236), and the norms of the toilets in the Students' Union are no exception. You join the end of the queue, wait your turn, and would not think of moving to the front of the line; those who were there before you take precedence. They come first in the chronological hierarchy and are rewarded a stall before you manage to receive one. These relations become a sort of "rule"; they are the standard that is followed. "Space is an integral part of social life and language events and is an important resource in the ordering of social experience. The distribution of space can instantiate particular systems of social control, for example, conventionalising differences between people, and making such delineations material and substantive" (Keating 1999: 234); the toilets do this very naturally. Within the toilets, there are socially conscripted norms and rules such as waiting in line, flushing the toilet and closing the stall door. Other norms and rules are relative to time and place, such as taking pictures and calling someone else into your stall. Toilets facilitate "rules" and norms that are unconsciously followed because they are so ingrained in our everyday thinking and acting.

When conducting my ethnography, I noticed that the queue for the women's toilets always extended out of the door of the bathroom. Contrarily, the traffic for the men's toilets flowed easily; there was rarely a queue at all. Despite the shorter wait time, only in the most desperate circumstance would a girl cross over to the queue for the men's toilet. Girls will faithfully wait to reach the front of their own queue, even if it takes ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes. Why not move over to the shorter line? Surely no one would notice or care? Yet, the action of changing lines is "not allowed". It is a "rule" and a norm that girls wait for the female toilets, while boys use the mostly identical male toilets. This is a socially constructed boundary; it is created through the repetition of gendered actions. This repetition of actions creates the social norm, which is transferred to social spaces, such as the Students' Union toilets. The gendered division of the toilets is an unspoken rule of social order; people have been conditioned to accept and adhere to it. A girl in the empty boys' bathroom would probably go undetected, and if they were detected, this would only be remarkable because of the breaking of a socially constructed taboo.

These "rules" and norms also help to maintain socially constructed binary gender identities. Identities are constructed "as a result of social interaction… 'identity' involves a dependence on a dialectic of self and others" (Jary & Jary 2006). Social identity is, therefore, "those aspects of the individual's self-concept which are derived from membership of and identification with social categories, e.g. race, gender, religion, occupation, and which are made salient in contexts where those social categories assume importance" (Jary & Jary 2006). Gender identity is given particular importance at the toilets in the Students' Union, and the toilets therefore construct social identities. The toilets in the Students' Union are labelled either male or female; however, students of the University of St Andrews are not confined within these two genders. Some students may have transitioned or be transitioning from male to female, or vice versa. Other students of the university may not identify as either male or female, yet, at the time of my fieldwork, there was no third toilet option in the Students' Union, nor were there unlabelled toilets in the main junction of the ground floor of the Students' Union. Therefore, the toilets reinforced binary gender identities because they forced people to choose between two socially constructed gender options: male or female.

All of the subjects I observed and interviewed were students; they are young adults, who are continuously being conditioned into social norms. This begets the question: when do we learn about the existence of bathroom norms? How are we conditioned to behave a certain way in this particular environment? As the subjects are still developing, so are the norms. It is not a norm to enter the stall of a toilet with another girl, but in the Students' Union, it is not unusual; this is becoming a norm. It is a norm to ask for toilet paper from strangers if you do not have any. It is a norm to take pictures in the mirrors of the toilets. These may not have always been social norms and will not always be social norms. This also creates questions of how gender norms are changing, and will continue to change, in regards to the use of toilets. As more focus is placed on the issue of gender identity and toilets, will more toilets become unlabelled? Will it become the norm for all people, regardless of gender identification, to use the same toilet spaces?

Conclusion: Toilets as Anthropological Social Spaces

In this essay, I have sought to demonstrate how toilets become social spaces rather than "non-places". Toilets might be considered "non-places" because they are largely sites of utility, and people do not linger within toilets for longer than is required. However, in the Students' Union, this was not the case on the nights I conducted my ethnographic research. Instead, on these nights, the women's toilets fulfilled the necessary qualifications for being considered anthropological places; they were sites of purpose, kinship, history, norms, and identity. The toilets become spaces of purpose when they are utilised as meeting places, and with these meetings, kinship relations are formed. Through this purpose and kinship, histories are constructed, creating stories and memories that can be told and retold. The space of a toilet is also imbued with social norms, which reinforce binary gender identities. The combination of these factors constructs the women's toilets in the Students' Union as social spaces, rather than utilitarian, mobility driven, "non-places".

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